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ABSTRACT

The successes of the Japanese educational system have been widely praised by western educators in recent years. But this success appears to have a dark side; an educational framework that places students in fierce competition with one another and in which school-related violence and suicide occur with disturbing frequency. This paper focuses on the reality of educational pressure in Japan and the effects it has on the children of that country. The paper is divided into three phases, all of which deal with the decade of the 1980s and involve Japanese teenagers. The first phase briefly describes and offers a critique of Japanese education as viewed by westerners. The second phase analyzes trends in school-related violence based on statistics from Japanese sources. The third phase outlines results of a descriptive, pilot study on school-related teenage suicide. A 9-item list of references is included. (DB)

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DO OR DIE: EDUCATIONAL PRESSURE AND TEENAGE SUICIDE IN JAPAN

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DO OR DIE: EDUCATIONAL PRESSURE AND TEENAGE SUICIDE IN JAPAN

In the decade of the 1980s, there were many western professionals who were dazzled by Japan and what seems to be her success in the field of education. Articles extolling the excellence and virtues of the Japanese educational system appeared time and again in varied journals and magazines. Business professionals and academics went as far as to suggest that Americans would better the U.S. school system if they adopted major components of the system of our Oriental neighbors. The literacy rate in Japan which was cited as being anywhere from 96% to 99% was used as one justification for revamping the American schools. From the outside, looking in, the U.S. educators praised the behavior and achievements of the students and teachers in Japan. Most comments echoed that: the students are orderly, well-mannered, and show the teacher respect; they score higher on math and science tests than American children do; they study more hours per week, and they attend better during class. The Japanese teachers were also praised: they are better educated, they are more dedicated, they study new methods, carry on research, counsel parents and students as a part of their job. There were very few articles written, however, about the detrimental side effects which result from a system that promotes and demands such a high rate of literacy.

What price do the children of Japan pay? What kinds of ill effects are manifested within an educational framework that overwhelms its students with such fierce competition?

The recent tragedy in Kobe, Japan, once again brought this tiny island into the spotlight. At Takatsuka High School on July 6, 1990, a teacher, intent on doing his job, slammed a 500-pound steel gate into a female student who was a few moments late. He crushed her skull. According to school records, 15-year-old Ryoko Ishida had never been late to school.

This is not an isolated incident. In the eighties many incidences such as this occurred:

Mr. Nakawatari, 24-years-old, died on the morning of January 30, 1985, six days after he was beaten in his classroom by a junior high school student. His death was due to damage to the stem of the brain.

In February, 1986 at a junior high school in Hyogo Prefecture, students got angry and stormed a teacher's classroom and beat and kicked him. They then turned on other teachers who came in and tried to help the teacher. In order to avoid further confusion and injury, the first teacher knelt on the floor and apologized. A total of 10 teachers suffered physical injury in that attack.

Thirteen-year-old Eriko Muraguchi was found dead at about 10:30 p.m. on January 21, 1985. She had hanged herself from a utility pole. Eriko had refused to attend school because she was being bullied.

These occurrences are real. They affected the lives of the families involved as well as the school personnel and students attending the schools. These events are not included here to sensationalize the issue. They are horrific enough without embellishment. These details are emphasized to bring attention and focus upon them, for these kinds of tragedies caused by school-related pressures are not uncommon in Japan today.

The present paper focuses on the reality of educational pressure in Japan and the effects it has on the children of that country. The paper is divided into three phases. All phases deal with the decade of the 1980s and involve Japanese teenagers. Phase 1) A brief description and critique of the literature of Japanese education as viewed by westerners; Phase 2) Trends in school-related violence based on statistics from Japanese sources; and Phase 3) Results of a descriptive, pilot study on school-related teenage suicide.

A Critique of Selected Western Viewpoints on Japanese Education

Who are the academics who seem to be pushing for changes in the structure and philosophy of the U.S. educational system? Some are scholars interested in things Japanese. Others are scholars who were involved in a cross-cultural research project sponsored by the U.S. government. In 1983 U.S. Secretary of Education asked twelve academics to investigate the Japanese educational system and report their findings.* The inquiry began in 1984 and continued through 1986. Some basic information, generalizations, and praise were printed in a document entitled Japanese Education Today (1987).

Two immediate questions come to mind when reading this document. First, how many of the American scholars involved in the study spoke Japanese? Nothing is mentioned in the report about Japanese language aptitude. Even though two of the twelve researchers have Japanese surnames, one can not assume that they speak Japanese. If this is indeed the case, then how could the American research team make any judgments of what was going on in the Japanese classroom or on the school grounds? Or how could they know if the teacher was getting a point across during a lesson; or what students outside a principal's office were really doing?

The second question that needs to be asked is: did the U.S. team have interpreters? If so, were they American, chosen by the U.S. research team, or were they chosen by the Japanese Board of Education?

Perhaps this sounds a bit paranoiac; but when viewed in the cultural context

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*Note: Japanese scholars were also sent to the U.S. to glean information about American education.

of Japan, these are questions that are extremely crucial. There is a distinct "double structure" at work in that eastern country which a foreign visitor might not be aware of. This double structure is called the tatemae/honne or "the official front" vs. the "internal truth." Almost all if not all Japanese are cognizant of this undercurrent philosophy and practice it as a lifestyle. Japanese people in particular want Japan to impress whenever possible. Consequently, the foreigner will more than likely see what the Japanese want her/him to see. What someone looking in from the outside will view is usually the tatemae or "official front." It would be a rare day when a member of the Japanese Board of Education willingly showed a visitor locked-door schools, or schools known for violence against teachers, or schools where ijime (or bullying) is rampant. Nor is it thinkable for a Japanese to discuss the rate of school-related suicides with outsiders.

These negative aspects, also a part of the Japanese educational machinery, are seldom discussed at any length in the western literature. Are these problems within the school system just "special, extraordinary cases" as is implied by the U.S. research team (p iv, 1987)? The government report responds to these troubling areas by saying that: ". . . by comparison with various other industrialized nations, including the U.S., delinquency (emphasis added) in Japan is mild and infrequent" (p. 46, 1987).

Merry White, also, in her 1985 article in Principal reluctantly admits that there are problems and proceeds to dismiss them with the same rationalization as the government:

> Problems have surfaced, of course. Psychotherapists report a syndrome among children related to school and examination pressure. School phobia, psychosomatic symptoms, and juvenile suicide are most frequently reported. Japan does lead the world in school-related suicides for the 15- to 19-

> year-old age group, at about 300 per year. Recently, the "battered teacher" and "battered parent" syndromes have received much attention. There are cases where teenagers have attacked or killed parents and teachers, and these have been related to examination pressure. The numbers involved in these cases are very small - at least in comparison with American delinquency patterns (emphasis added) and other juvenile pathologies (p. 20).

Not only the U.S. researchers but also White sweeps aside the school-related suicide and the school-violence issues by saying that Japan still isn't as crime-ridden as the U.S. It does not seem logical to mention, as they do, American delinquency patterns here. Delinquency patterns of either country are not the issue. White as well as the researchers are discussing school-related pressures that cause suicide and crime in Japan, not overall juvenile delinquency patterns. How many violent acts in America by teens are due to school and examination pressure? How many American teens commit suicide because they have to take the SAT?

When speaking of Japan, it is not the "low" rate of school-related violence that should be expounded upon, but rather the sharp, dramatic increase in the rate. In a country that had virtually no violence in the schools up to the mid-seventies to now have one teacher attacked and physically injured by junior high students every four days in Tokyo is shocking.[1] Furthermore, there is a school-related violent act occurring in Tokyo every 29 hours.[2] It should be reiterated that it is the drastic rise in school-related violence which is of utmost concern.

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[1]See "Escalating School Violence", the Japan Times, 1981.

[2]Ibid.

Trends in School-related Violence

There are many serious problems in the Japanese school system. To consider them as "extraordinary" or "special cases" is to push aside a growing social problem in that country. What is extraordinary is that while western educators were applauding Japan, the Japanese were panicking, trying to do something constructive about their problems. This is evident when reading major newspapers.

The present study was undertaken to see if further investigation into issues such as these is warranted. By perusing a major Japanese newspaper, the Japan Times, it was apparent that these problems were predominant during the 1980s (see List One, pp. 7-9). Please note the titles of articles which appeared in that decade[3]. These news reports contain valid statistics from the National Policy Agency, the Prime Minister's Office, and the Japanese Ministry of Education. Please keep in mind that even though some titles may not appear school-related per se, no article was included that did not have some reference to school-related violence or self-inflicted injury.

Of special interest is that in 1986 there were a total of 18 articles. Then, in the years 1988-1989, the number of articles plummeted (in fact in 1989 there were no articles at all). This is not unusual in light of the fact that the 1987 U.S. report was being published sanctioning the Japanese process of educating their youth.

When viewing the eighties and the trends therein, several points can be made. First, the age of the school-related violent act offenders went down after 1980. That is, whereas previously many of the violent acts were carried out by secondary students, during the eighties most violent acts were done by lower secondary students. For example, in 1982, 88.3% of all school-related violent

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There were no issues of the Japan Times available for the year 1987.

LIST ONE

Articles written about school-related violence in Japan: 1980-1989

1980

Violent crime increases among minors

1981

Makieda Urges Teachers Find Way to Curb Student Violence

Testimony on School Violence

Schools, Local Police Told to Stem Violence

Statistics on Juvenile Crime

Number of Youths Investigated For Crime Hits Record in 1980

Escalating School Violence

Growing Army of Violent Children

85,000 Minors Investigated For Criminal Acts in January - June

Student Delinquency Hitting 3rd Postwar Peak, Gov't Report Says

1982

Teachers Say Delinquency Spreading in Schools

1/3 of Students Feel Violent Urge Against Teachers

1983

Government White Paper on Youth

NPA Issues Warning Against School Violence

Education Ministry, Experts Discuss Juvenile Delinquency

Worsening of School Violence in March, MPD Says

Osaka School Violence Reaches High

Study Links Low Grades to Violence in Schools

5 Students Arrested for Killing Schoolmate

6,176 Teens Deserted Home in March

Cases of Violence Up Sharply in Nation's Jr. High Schools

Stabbing at Jr. High Sparks Debate

Schools Barred 1,092 Jr. High Students as Delinquents: Poll

LIST ONE CONTINUED

1984

Truancy Manual Distributed

School Violence Declines

Student Suicides Rise;
Educators Dismayed

1985

Student Beats Teacher to Death

Bullying Blamed for Suicide

Bullying Increasing in Schools

Japan, U.S., Jr. High Pupils
Moms Polled

Bullying a Grim School Reality

School Bullying Problem Grows

Student Bullying Causes Suicide

Bullying, Absenteeism Increased
in '84

Bullied Teen Kills Himself

1986

Teen Suicide Victim's Complaints
Ignored

Juvenile Crime Rate Goes Up: NPA

1986 continued

Schoolboy Hangs Self in Dorm Room

When Teachers Get Together

Teacher Took Part in Bullying
Victim

155,066 Bullying Cases Reported

Bullied Jr. High Girl Commits
Suicide

Jr. High Students Attack Teachers

'Demonic' Mother, Son Blamed for
Boy's Suicide

Life-or-Death Education

Teacher Gets 3-Yr. Prison Term for
Beating Death of Student

Teens Commit Suicide

Battered Student Dies

Truancy Increasing, Says Ministry

The Dilemma of Japan's Education

Student in Coma After Suicide
Attempt

Boy Commits Suicide in Despair
Over Bullying

Bullying in Japan's Schools Up in
in '85

LIST ONE CONTINUED

1987

No data available

1988

Police arrest 16-year-old in
stabbing death of teacher

Incidents of violence and bullying
decline in Tokyo public schools

Juvenile delinquency reaches the
second-highest level ever

The children who refuse to go to
school

'Daiken' opens doors to dropouts

1989

No articles found

No article that was written about the same case was listed twice.

acts occurred in the lower secondary schools (Prime Minister's Office, 1982).

Second, it is indeed fortunate to see a decrease in the number of overall teenage suicides (World Health Statistics Annual). Educators, however, must utilize caution when looking at these numbers. Even though overall rates are decreasing, this does not mean that school-related teenage suicide rates are decreasing. To use overall decreasing rates as a point in favor of employing Japanese educational strategies in the U.S. is not valid.

Third, although the startling suicide rates seen in the 1970s have possibly decreased, they were replaced by two disturbing new trends which appeared in the early eighties: school violence, including students and teachers, and ijime, or bullying.

A major problem Japanese educators seemingly reluctantly faced in the early to mid years was the increase in the attacks on teachers. Because the teacher had always been so revered, this increase was frightening. The National Police Agency stated that the attacks on teachers increased 69.8% in 1980. As was stated previously, one junior high school teacher is attacked and physically injured every four days in Tokyo.

Officials also stated that attacks on female teachers has risen over the years. In most cases, it is the female student who attacks a female teacher. Although the number of violent cases against female educators is low, the incredible news is that this figure tripled from April of 1982 to September of 1982.

Why do these students commit acts of violence? A survey completed by the Prime Minister's Office in July 1982 reported that 51% of 2,000 students polled cited teacher favoritism as the reason for acts of violence in school. Students also mentioned persistent scolding and teacher indecision as other major reasons.

What about bullying? In regard to bullying, the harsh aspect is that

students are becoming more vicious in their techniques. They are now armed with metal baseball bats, hammers, wooden swords, and scissors. In 1985, 68.8% of the junior high schools reported incidents of violent bullying. 58,609 cases of bullying (each case usually involving many people) were reported that year to the Ministry of Education. This number does not include other school-related violent acts which would indeed increase the cases of school-related crimes.

As a corollary to this rampant bullying, absenteeism emerged as a trend. Absenteeism reached a 30-year high in 1985 of students who missed more than 50 days or more. By 1986, this number had almost doubled.

School-related Teenage Suicide: Some Background

Japan's overall teenage suicide rate for many years was the highest in the world. Researchers attributed many of these suicides to the pressures of the demanding and unrelenting educational system. Mamoru Iga compiled detailed research in this area. His work regarding students concentrated on data up to the mid-seventies, and in one section of his book The Thorn in the Chrysanthemum (1986), he has an excellent discussion on educational pressures.

As far back as 1961, 60.8% of junior high school students reported that "entrance examinations and schoolwork" was their greatest worry. Iga states that an unheard of percentage of females ranked these as their primary concern (62.7%). Then, again in 1976, "entrance examinations and schoolwork" ranked first among major concerns of junior high school students (Nagoya, 1976).

In 1974 for the months of April, May, and June, it was found by the Japanese Ministry of Welfare that 34.1% of males, 19 and under, who committed suicide did so due to schoolwork. This was the number one cause. It should be noted here that April is one of the months in which the results of the university examinations are distributed.

Iga suggests that the reason students are obsessed with the entrance examinations is twofold. First is the society's "do-or-die" attitude toward the exam. In order to elevate social status and achieve security, educational success is imperative. Secondly, there is the "one-shot" principle:

> Whereas the evaluation of an individual in America is spread over many years, a Japanese person's entire career depends upon his success in a single event, the entrance examination to a university. (pp. 38-39)

What about teenage suicide caused by educational pressure in Japan during the eighties? First, consider what westerners have said. In the U.S. report of 1987 there is nothing mentioned for grades 7-9. For grades 10-12, however, there are a few statements made that beg comment:

> Worry about examinations is a continuing reality for most Japanese high school students and their families, but - dramatic media coverage notwithstanding - it is not true that large numbers of disappointed youth are driven to take their own lives because of their failure to pass the entrance examination to elite universities. While school-related factors are clearly among the important causes of suicide, examinations per se are not the dominant factor . . . (p. 45)

There are two problems with the statements in this paragraph. First, no source is given for these statements. Secondly, with a system set up so that a person's entire life is based on a one-shot, "do-or-die" experience (i.e., the university entrance examination), how can the U.S. researchers separate school-related factors from this ordeal? Japanese children spend 12 years of their short childhood preparing for this examination. Consequently, how can the years of stress leading up to that exam be separated from the exam itself?

In addition, as previously mentioned, White (1985) cites that Japan leads the world in school-related suicides for teens 15-19 at about 300 per year. If White's statistics are correct, this means that 50% of the overall suicides was school-related for the year 1980; 57% for 1981; and 60% for the year 1982.

What does the literature say about why these young students take their 'own lives? In the material perused, the only information dealing with the reasons was released in 1981. In that year the White Paper on Suicides printed by the government addressed this question. According to the Paper, juvenile suicides were caused by scoldings from parents, scoldings from teachers, inability to keep up with schoolwork, problems with friends, and relations with the opposite sex.

School-related Teenage Suicide: A Pilot Study

Questions about teenage suicide are worth answering, such as: who are these teens; what methods do they use to inflict injury upon themselves? Where do they commit suicide? When do they kill themselves, and most importantly, why do they kill themselves? These questions need answers, but because Japan is a closed society, data is not readily obtainable.

It is for this reason that the present study should be considered descriptive in nature. Because newspapers were the available source of the data, large numbers are not dealt with. Fifteen case studies of junior high and senior high school students who took their own lives were analyzed. All articles were taken from a major Japanese newspaper, the Japan Times, for the years 1985-1986. The sources of the information were the National Police Agency and the Ministry of Education.

Analyzing the data, the following can be specified:

1) Fourteen out of the fifteen cases cited were school-related

suicides; no school-related reason was given for one suicide, however, it was mentioned that the victim was a cram school student.

2) The average age of the child who took his or her own life was 14.3 years old.
3) 73.3% of the students who committed suicide were males.
4) About half of the students killed themselves by hanging.
5) Other methods included: jumping (off of buildings and in front of trains), drowning, ingesting poison, and using a rifle.
6) Out of 15, over half of the students killed themselves in the early winter months of January and February. (Note: these are the months in which the entrance examinations are given).
and
7) Thirteen out of fifteen children killed themselves because they were being bullied.

Conclusion

Something has gone awry in Japan. The Japanese know it; they write about it; they meet to discuss it; they form committees to try to handle it; and they visit foreign countries to find solutions for it. If the American scholars do, indeed, want to assimilate Japanese philosophies and structure into the U.S. educational system, it is appropriate that they consider all of the downsides to such an extreme change. To date, no convincing data has been presented which would even suggest that such a conversion would be beneficial to American students. If educators want to alter their system in the U.S., why would they advocate a system that would more than likely place more stress on children and young adults? In order to make this kind of decision, U.S. researchers need to somehow

find a way to get through the Japanese tatemae. Scholars need to conduct research which gives true information as to what is happening inside the Japanese schools.

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